

The Moral Libertarian Argument Against Early-21st Century 'Class Struggle'

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On why Moral Libertarianism is incompatible with contemporary identity politics

In recent years, much has been said about the divisive radical identity politics that is tearing our society apart. Left-leaning liberals and progressives, who were once reluctant to criticise these movements out of a misguided concern for 'progressive unity', are becoming increasingly frustrated. But most people still don't seem to get the point of these movements. The words of liberals lamenting how American Left views on issues of identity and equality have strayed far from those of Martin Luther King and Barack Obama in recent years have become a refrain among those who have been more awake to the problem. However, putting it this way frames the problem as a misguided development in a movement still otherwise committed to the values of King and Obama. Rather, to put it bluntly, sections of the Western Left have been hijacked by an alien ideology that shares almost nothing in common with historical liberalism.

The Ideology that is sort of Marxist but not quite like the Marxism we are familiar with

The kind of divisive identity politics we are seeing is based on a political ideology, an ideology that is perhaps not yet well understood by the majority of liberals and progressives. Those behind the divisive drama do not even want the same things as mainstream liberals and progressives. In conventional Western politics, we are conditioned to see politics as a spectrum, from 'extremely liberal' to 'extremely conservative'. However, this spectrum presupposes that there are only two main worldviews, which recent events have thoroughly discredited. To put it simply, the ideology behind the recent divisive identity politics looks like this: it is an ideology that believes the only way to change is to tear apart our existing social fabric, because there cannot be real change in liberal reform, no matter what. It is an ideology that believes there is no point in rational debate and changing people's minds, because the playing field will always favor the privileged, no matter what. It is an ideology that believes it's always going to be an us-vs-them world, at least until some kind of revolution, and the only way to progress is for the oppressed to win and the formerly privileged to lose. In this worldview, to achieve social change, the 'oppressed' would have to develop a consciousness of being oppressed, and fight for victory over their 'oppressors'. Such an ideology would have to constantly create conflict so as to make its case for how useless reformist politics is, and to arouse the fighting spirit of its adherents. Therefore, it needs to make the most of every perceived injustice, no matter how insignificant: the value is in the fight, not the issue itself. Hence the pointless culture wars over inauthentic Asian food, or over Beyonce in an Indian dress. This kind of thinking has probably been lurking in the shadows of the extreme left for at least several decades. With rising frustration in society and the ease of spreading ideas via the internet and social media, it now has a substantial audience and support base.

The idea that it would be better for the oppressed to rise up as a group and fight their 'oppressors' as a group, without consideration for individual guilt or lack thereof, is actually not a new idea. It probably originated in the Marxist idea of class struggle, where the working class would develop class consciousness, and come together to struggle against the propertied class, to bring about a revolution and establish a 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. While Marx only intended for his idea to apply to economic classes, this idea has since taken on a life of its own, as ideas often do. After all, economic classes aren't the only fracture lines in society where this model could be applied. This is why, in late identity politics, it has all been about 'group consciousness' and group claims. The similarity of some of the language used in identity politics movements with traditional Marxist language hints at the historical origin of their model of social change. Of course, this is a very illiberal model of change, in that it violates the equality of every individual and the right of every individual to pursue life, liberty and happiness. But radicals, in the true sense of the word, have never quite agreed with America's founding fathers, anyway. This probably explains why some identity politics movements do not see any irony in asking whites to march at the back, for example.

[More on the Methods of Radical Identity Politics](#)

Radical identity politics is essentially a distorted form of class struggle politics, and for practitioners of identity politics, much of the time the value is in the struggle itself. In fact, we need to completely drop the illusion that radical identity politics of any form is somehow about controlling thought and behaviour through specific policies or actions: it's not. History has taught us that the most effective way of gaining support for otherwise unpopular and illiberal ideas is when you have a divisive situation, where people feel oppressed, or are in a struggle state of mind. Therefore, for extremists of all stripes, it's really all about creating the struggle. While the free speech we so value is often the first victim, we must not fall for their invitation for struggle. By deliberately aligning oneself against radical identity politics, one can only give fuel to the struggle, which in turn emboldens the growth of identity politics. Instead of being drawn into the proposed 'struggles', we need to re-assert the importance of free speech, but we also need to bring those on both sides of each argument along, and be able to re-assure them that the liberal democratic process, including free speech and the free market of ideas, is a fair one for all.

[For Moral Libertarians, there is simply no Common Ground with Radical Identity Politics. Appeasement is also Not an Option.](#)

In the face of divisive identity politics, true liberals who believe in the way of America's founding fathers, Lincoln, King and Obama alike must take a strong stance against it. This is because, first and foremost, the ideology behind radical identity politics is simply incompatible with the values of liberalism, including the equality and autonomy of individuals, the right of every individual to pursue life and liberty for themselves, and democratic governance via peaceful processes. Every time radical identity politics is practiced, it is effectively spitting into the face of liberal ideals.

For committed moral libertarians, radical identity politics is fundamentally a violation of our most basic principle of morality. As moral libertarians, we believe that situations or movements are only

morally sound when all individuals have Equal Moral Agency (EMA). While this is an ideal that can't always be met in real life, any deliberate move away from this ideal is to be considered inherently immoral. In radical identity politics, people are often allocated moral agency (e.g. in having a platform to speak or not) in a deliberately unequal way. Furthermore, individuals in supposedly marginalised groups who do not take up the 'fight against oppression' (as dictated by self-appointed movement leaders) are often treated as 'class traitors', and have their moral agency deliberately taken away as a result. Therefore, there is simply no way a committed moral libertarian can accept working with practitioners of radical identity politics under any circumstances. Instead, we must strongly and clearly oppose radical identity politics at all times, as a matter of moral principle.

Proclaiming the Liberal Alternative

The best alternative to radical identity politics is liberalism, with its message of liberty and equal opportunity for all, and treating each individual as independent and equally important rather than as members of a class or group. In a society where the great ideals of liberalism are commonly accepted, there simply will be no place for group-struggle-based divisive identity politics, and the authoritarian control of thought and speech that inevitably comes with it. However, I must stress again that for liberalism to have widespread support, it must be seen as truly serving everyone, and living up to its promises. It must also be seen as a more moral ideology than its rivals.

Therefore, as liberals, we need to abide by the core principles of liberalism, and apply it equally to all sectors of society, majorities and minorities. I believe what makes liberalism different from (and better than) all other ideologies is its commitment to giving everybody equal moral agency. As reformists (rather than revolutionaries, because revolutionary action is incompatible with moral libertarianism), we understand that we won't get there overnight, but in each era of society we try to make things more liberal, for example by upholding everyone's equal right to free speech, by encouraging rational and objective debate of social issues, and just as importantly, by trying to remove discrimination and prejudice using liberal means. As liberals, our historical achievements in social reform include the equality of political rights regardless of race or gender, the end of slavery and segregation, the end of colonialism and the establishment of a system of international diplomacy, and yes, marriage equality. We must not downplay this legacy just because we are currently engaged in a bitter argument over freedom of speech and conscience with the far-left. Especially when these achievements would have been impossible without free speech and the free market of ideas.